

Living with wildlife - All about squirrels

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EMC Lifestyle - The American red squirrel is a much smaller species, less than half the size of the eastern grey squirrel. But what it lacks in size it more than makes up for in spunk. It frequently makes its home in coniferous or evergreen trees such as pine, spruce and cedar.

While it shares many habits of the grey squirrel, there are some distinct differences. It's more territorial and quite aggressive in chasing the larger grey squirrel away. It seldom ventures far from trees and while you may not always see it, you can hear its chick-chick-chick sounds, warning of an intruder.

In midsummer, it stashes hundreds of pinecones while they are still green, storing them in damp places, called middens, which prevents the scales from opening and the seeds dispersing. It owes its success to the wide variety of food it relies on. Besides the cones it eats nuts, buds, flowers, mushrooms, a wide variety of insects, and sap in season.

In rehabilitating young orphans, we found they definitely had more of a 'sweet tooth' than the greys with a real liking for fruit.

Like the grey squirrel, in caching tree seeds, the red squirrel plays an important role in reforestation.

The other local squirrel is the northern flying squirrel. Few of us have the privilege of observing flying squirrels because they are nocturnal and most active between sunset and sunrise.

Although larger than the Southern Flying Squirrel, both species are small and delicately built. A large fold of skin called a patagium, extending from their wrist to their ankle, serves as an air foil, allowing them to glide effortlessly up to 50 yards from tree to tree. Another gliding assist is the squirrel's flat tail, which serves as a rudder.

They have huge black luminous eyes - a characteristic of night animals - and exceptionally soft, silky, dense grey-brown fur. Their perfectly round pink mouths add to their enchanting quizzical expression, leading some to call them 'imps of the forest night'.

Flying squirrels are very sociable, with adults feeding and playing together and as many as twenty occupying the same den during winter.

Their distinctive physical characteristics are evident from birth. When in the Centre's care, they would cling to the formula feeding syringe with tiny feet that were attached to this large umbrella-like fold of skin, making them appear like little old ladies wearing a shawl.

This remains the height of the birthing season for wildlife. Remember to consult the Ottawa-Carleton Wildlife Centre at www.wildlifeinfo.ca before taking any action.

Donna DuBreuil is the president of the Ottawa-Carleton Wildlife Centre.